It's Getting Even Tougher To Hide From Abusers -- Detectives' Aid In Hounding Victims Raises Legal, Moral Issues

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She called police. She got a court order for protection. She fled to a battered-women's shelter. She entered the state Address Confidentiality Program to get a driver's license without an address, an unlisted phone number and an apartment that was supposed to be untraceable.

But a short time later, the battered woman opened her front door in Federal Way to find her husband standing there. He'd found out where she lived with the help of a private investigator.

Feeling she had nowhere to escape, she allowed the man who had beaten, choked and harassed her to move back in.

"It's scary because I feel I'm a sitting duck," she said. "My son is afraid to go to sleep; I know how he feels. But if I move, it will simply happen again. I can't live in shelters the rest of my life."

For the woman and many other women who flee domestic violence, the prospects of being hunted down are growing as private investigators get new and better tools to find them.

Today, private investigators are in reach of more people because computers allow them to work faster and cheaper. And they often have sources of information whose own computers or contacts allow them to tap into areas that were once private.

Deborah Nelli, a licensed private investigator in Issaquah, is concerned some investigators are careless in helping hostile ex-boyfriends stay on the trail of their abuse victims. In a 1993 lawsuit, Nelli accused a former partner of "selling addresses of women to male clients without checking the motives or legitimacy of the male clients."

She said Windsor & Nelli Associates Inc. had helped a Sacramento man, Azizolla Mazooni, track down his 18-year-old ex-girlfriend in Seattle in 1989. Mazooni shot and killed the woman and another person on the University of Washington campus just over a week later.

The Seattle detective agency had provided the scared woman's address to a California investigator who had been hired by Mazooni. County prosecutors said Mazooni, who was convicted of second-degree murder, also obtained information on the victim through bank records and the UW registrar.

Nelli's former partner, Windsor Olson, denied any improper actions, and their lawsuit - over the purchase price of the detective firm - recently was settled out of court.

Reginald Montgomery, a regional director in New Jersey for the National Association of Legal Investigators, said it's become much easier to do research by computer and telephone. In the past, a search for someone in another state might have required a trip there or the hiring of another private investigator, costing $1,500 to $5,000.

A similar search today would cost $50 to $150 - small change for batterers insistent on finding their wives or girlfriends.

"One of the most amazing things in this work is the amount of energy batterers put into finding their partners," said Rebecca Johnson, chairwoman of the Washington Coalition Against Domestic Violence, representing 40 shelters in the state.

"When you have private eyes hired and attorneys hired and the victim doesn't have funds to fight, then the person with power has whole systems and institutions on his side," she said.

Legal responsibility

The no-questions-asked private investigator should be the target when it comes to taking the legal responsibility for his action, said Ernest Barth, a former King County police officer and now a private investigator. He is outraged at those in the profession who engage in illegal searches and take cases from questionable clients without checking the full story.

"Everybody has to work to eat and pay the bills. When you're hungry, those are the ones who take the garbage cases" and give the entire profession a bad name, he said.

In the case of the Federal Way woman, Tim Ripoli, with A-1 Investigations in Tacoma, said he helped the husband find her once last year, but refused to help him a second time after learning she had gone into the Address Confidentiality Program. Apparently, the man found his wife the second time at an address Ripoli had given him earlier.

"It wasn't too hard at all" for Ripoli to find the woman last year, he said. "I made a couple phone calls to a couple sources and found out."

Never told him

Ripoli said the man never told him his wife had a protective order and a restraining order.

"I didn't do anything illegal," he said. "My client lied. I didn't do anything wrong."

Montgomery, of the investigators' association, was in the middle of searching for a missing spouse when he found that his client was on parole for trying to kill her. The man had blown up her car, burned down her house and killed her dog. Montgomery stopped his investigation.

Doug Saint-Denis, private investigator with Absolute Services Inc. of Lynnwood, said he makes a habit of doing court checks to look for protective orders against most men who hire him to look for women.

"As far as I know, there aren't any other investigators that do this, and I've talked to a lot of them about it," Saint-Denis said. "They just say, `Aw, you know, if they're going to pay for the information, I'll get it for them, because if I don't, somebody else will.' That is true."

Once, Saint-Denis found out a client was on parole for raping the woman he was trying to find. He dropped the client and phoned the woman to give her some advice on what she could do to hide and protect herself.

Meanwhile, he said, the client went to another private investigator, who gave him the information. The rapist then beat the woman badly, Saint-Denis said.

He said state laws and regulations should be changed to clarify that one of the responsibilities of a private detective is to check on a client who may be violating a restraining order.

State official is concerned

Arnold Stoehr, program manager for the state Department of Licensing's private-detective division, said it would be a violation to aid and abet someone in breaking the law, but there is no requirement for detectives to check on their clients.

The law, however, does indicate that "incompetence or negligence" creating an "unreasonable risk" to a person may be grounds for discipline or license revocation.

There are about 650 detective agencies or individuals licensed with the state, and possibly as many more without licenses, Stoehr said.

Stoehr tells battered women found by private investigators: "Give us the facts and figures. We have to react."

For the Federal Way woman and others, the state Address Confidentiality Program is supposed to help them disappear. It was created in 1991 for battered women whose lives are at risk.

It gives the more than 500 participating women an Olympia postal address where they can receive mail in care of the secretary of state. It can help a woman change her name and get a new Social Security number, too - although to do so without leaving a trace, she often must sacrifice her entire work history. The program also allows the women to vote and obtain driver's licenses.

Should a woman in the program be found, most likely it's from her making errors in judgment by telling someone of her new location, said Pam Davenport, director of the program.

She said that, while it is extremely rare for anyone in the program to be found, "As our society becomes more technologically advanced, hiding out and relocating becomes increasingly difficult."

Waiting for another chance

The day the Federal Way woman opened the door and found her husband standing there, she said he told her he had been sitting in the driveway watching her for some time. She knows she'll have to move again. But she has no more faith that she can really hide.

For now, she has felt unable to do anything but watch his moods, move ahead with a divorce and wait for a better time to get away.

"It's not like I haven't tried," she said. "I can thank the investigator for the problems I'm having now."